

## Chapter 11. Abhidharma Theory of Matter

Dhammas are of two kinds: *nāma-dhammā* and *rūpa-dhammā*, psychological factors and physical factors. In the Buddhist thought, all analyses begin with matters: *pañca-khandhas*, 6 *dhātus*, 12 *āyatanas*, and 18 *dhātus*. In Theravāda Abhidhamma, they speak of four *paramattha*: *rūpa*, *citta*, *cetasika*, *nibbāna*.

The Buddhist term for 'matter' is '*rūpa*'; an ābhidharmic term for element of matter is *rūpino dhammā* - material elements. What is the term for mental elements? It is *arūpino dhammā* – non-material.

There is only one definition in the *Samyutta Nikaya* for 'matter'- *ruppatīti rupam* - to get agitated, to get disturbed (in the physical sense). *Ruppati* has psychological sense (*ruppati* "rup + ya" "is vexed or changed").

In the *Abhidhamma-pitaka* there is not a single definition of *rūpa*; but it is linked together with *rūpa-dhammas*. In the Pali commentary we find a definition: *Ruppana-lakkhanam rūpam* - matter is that which has the characteristic of *rūpa*. The factor of *rūpa* is explained particularly with referent to heat, to cremate. *Rūpa* means something that undergoes change due to primary disturb, heat or hot. Ultimately everything can be reduced to energy.

In the *Abhidhammakosa*, *rūpa* is defined as: *rūpa* is that which has characteristic of *pratighāta*. This is a better definition. *Pratighāta* means resistance or impenetrability. *Pratighāta-lakkhanam rūpam* - matter is that which has the characteristic of resistance, impenetrability. It is further explained as that which occupies space. There cannot be two things to occupy the very space at the same time. Thus, it is also impenetrable, resistance. Where there is one material object, there cannot be at same time, at same place another material object. And because they are resistance, so matter is that which expand in space.

According to Abhidharma schools, the material substance is not recognized, just as much as there is no spiritual substance within us like *ātman*. Substance is only a fiction of mind and that is only a product of imagination. So the Buddhist analysis of matter can be understood just as in the same way as Buddhist analysis of mind. There is no material substance, only material phenomena. It is material phenomena which we came to be referred to as *rūpino dhammā*.

In early Buddhism, how many matters are there together? Five sense organ: *rūpa*, *sadda*, *gandha*, *rasa*, *phahabha*. All of material world can reduced in these five.

The Sautrāntikas recognized only ten kinds of matters: the five physical sense organs and the corresponding five sense objects.

The Ābhidharmikas increase the number of dharmas, and as a reaction of this, the Sautrāntikas cut down the unnecessary list of dharmas. Theravada definition of matter is associated with one element - *Paṭhavi*.

There are four primary elements. *Paṭhavi* is defined in Abhidhamma as *kakkhalatta*, the factor of hardness or solidity, and *Pattharama*, extension. So *Paṭhavi* has two characteristics: one is hardness; the other is extension. The idea of hardness or solidity of something is based on three dimensions: height, length and breadth. A material thing occupies space in these three dimensions. Hardness and extension are two convertible terms. They refer to the same thing in different ways. So *Kakkhalatta* (hardness) corresponds to *pratighāta* (resistance).

According to Theravada, whatever there is matter, there is *Paṭhavi dhātu*. *Paṭhavi dhātu* is preserving every instant matter. It is to say that every instant matter has these 3 characteristics -- resistance, hardness and extension.

According to both Theravada and Sarvāstivāda, matter is what occupies space. In other words, matter is that which has the characteristics of resistance, hardness and extension. If you say that matter has two qualities: hardness and extension, it is wrong. The very factor of hardness is matter; the very factor of extension is matter. They are not two characteristics. It is also wrong to say that substance is called matter and quality is called hardness. This is because there is no distinction between substance and quality.

Matter is the very factor of hardness, the very factor of extension. There is no mental substance or material substance. *Ātman* is rejected not only in the domain of mind but also in the domain of matter. There is also no *ātman* between matter and mind. *Ātman* is self-existing entity. There is only material phenomena, not material substance. Change is not visible, but it is always going on. Change is not due to external agent. Whatever is the nature of arising is the nature of cessation.

In early Buddhism, matter is called *rūpadhātu*. Early Buddhism is only interested in religious purposes. In Theravada, matter comes to be defined as *Rūppanalakkhana* - characteristic of *rūppana*. *Rūppana* means the factor of change. The commentators say that in the case of matter, *rūpa* can be understood as a kind of change due to climatic forces. According to climatic factors, change is always going on therefore everything is always changing. According to Buddhism, there is no matter, there are only material qualities. You can never see or hear or touch something called matter, what you experience is either color, smell, noise, taste or touch. Buddhist schools speak of large list of material elements, they are called *Rūpa-dhammā* (elements of matter). There are three main lists: *Theravāda*, *Vaibhāṣika* and *Sautrāntika*.

In Sanskrit Abhidhamma, matter is defined as: *Pratighāta-lakṣaṇa* - matter has characteristic of resistance. "Wherever there is one material object which has characteristic of resistance there cannot at the same time be another material object which has characteristic of resistance." This is standard definition given in Abhidharmakośa. Another definition of matter in Abhidharmakośa is *āvaraṇa-lakṣaṇa* - matter which has the characteristic of extension in space.

The Abhidharmika-s emphasize on objective existence. They increase the number of dharmas. In other words, the Abhidharmika-s increase the contents of *paramartha*. Sauntrāntikas emphasize on subjective existence. They reduce the number of dharmas. Take space as an example, the Abhidharmika-s say that space is dharma element. But the Sauntrāntika-s say that there is no space. Sauntrāntika-s pave the way to Mahāyāna who rejects Dhammavāda.

The Sarvāstivāda defined each dharma has a *svabhāva* (own nature), but the Madhyamaka says that nothing has its *svabhāva*. The so called *svabhāva* is dependent on many other factors, so how could it be called a *svabhāva*.

According to the Sarvāstivādins, by determining the specific or unique characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) of each constituent in the complex of human experience, a list of real entities (*dravya*) is derived. A dharma is defined as that which holds its specific characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa-dharaṇad dharmah*). A uniquely characterisable entity is a uniquely real – in the absolute sense (*paramārthataḥ*) – entity having a

unique intrinsic nature (svabhāva). The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra distinguishes svalakṣaṇa from sāmānya-lakṣaṇa (common characteristic) as follows: 'The analysis of the lakṣaṇa of a single entity (dravya) is the analysis of svalakṣaṇa. The analysis of the lakṣaṇa of numerous entities is the analysis of sāmānya-lakṣaṇa.' Further, 'the svabhāva of dharma-s are the svalakṣaṇa of dharma-s. Homogeneity in nature is the sāmānya-lakṣaṇa.' Thus all rūpa-s, vedana-s, samjña-s etc., have the nature of impermanent. This impermanent nature is a sāmānya-lakṣaṇa. The general Sarvāstivāda tradition recognizes a list of 75 dharma-s. Of all the Abhidharma studies, the examination of svalakṣaṇa and sāmānya-lakṣaṇa may be considered the most important. In fact the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra goes as far to declare that Abhidharma is precisely the analysis of the svalakṣaṇa and sāmānya-lakṣaṇa of dharma-s.

### **Mahābhūta - Primary matter**

According to Theravāda, there are 28 material elements. Actually, in the canonical Abhidharma pitaka they are only 27 material elements which are listed into two groups: primary and secondary. The primary group is called *Mahābhūta*; the secondary group is called *Upādārūpa* (*bhautika* Sanskrit).

Primary matter consist of four Mahābhūtas (Buddhism does not accept the *ākāśa* as *mahābhūta*) because *ākāśa* is absent of matter. *Sapratighadravyābhāvamātra*, that is Sautrāntika's definition given to the *ākāśa* which Theravādin also accepted it. *Ākāśa* means the mere absence of the matter which has the characteristic of resistance.

If you compare Buddhist philosophy and non-Buddhist philosophy in India, Buddhism pave a way of the subjective nature of things. *Ākāśa* is something mental in interpretation, it is a mere notion, and lack of matter.

Actually, in the development of all the Buddhist philosophy, starting from early Buddhism to Mahāyāna, the question of 'the number of dharmas gradually reduced. The Abhidhamma dealing with number of *nāma-rūpa* dharmas; the Sautrāntika-s cut down the list to the minimum; then the Mādhyamikas claimed that they are all *śūnya*; then the Viññānavādins came with the mind only, the mere consciousness. There is no actual objective as all are mind made, all mental projections.

Matter is divided into two main categories:

1. Primary matter = *mahābhūta*.
2. Second matter = *upādārūpa*.

The distinction between *mahābhūta* and *upādārūpa* is based on causality; it is not a distinction between substance and quality. Buddhist philosophy never recognizes the distinction between substance and quality. The distinction between substance and quality paves the way to Ātmavāda, which believes self-entity. *Upādā* are those material elements which are necessarily dependent on *mahābhūtas*. *Upādā* is not derived from Mahābhūta.

In the discourses of the Buddha, there are four primary matters which refer to *mahābhūtas*: *pathavi* (earth element), *āpo* (water), *tejo* (heat), and *vāyo* (wind). Buddhism recognizes only four *mahābhūtas*, which is also common to Jainism.

Other Indian philosophies believe that *ākāsa* is the fifth *mahābhūta*. *Ākāsa* is never used as *mahābhūta* in Buddhist Texts.

## Ākāsa

According to the Abhidhamma, *ākāsa* is *athāva*, which means that the thing does not exist objectively. Abhidhamma does not recognize that *ākāsa* is defined as a thing which has infinite extension, infinite continuity. According to Abhidhamma, *ākāsa* is *paññatti*, a concept. There is no one space, but many spaces. You cannot speak of space without matter. The concept of space is dependent on matter. We have a feeling that space is an infinite dimension in which things exist and move. This is common belief given by other Indian philosophy. For Buddhism, space means the absence of matter. *Paṭhavi*, *āpo*, *tejo*, *vāyo*, *ākāsa* and *viññāna* together are called *dhātu*. *Dhātu* is a wider term, which includes the four *mahābhūtas*, *ākāsa* and *viññāna*.

According to Abhidhamma, these four *mahābhūtas* are not the literal meaning: earth, water, fire and wind, but they are material qualities.

1. *Paṭhavi*, hardness (*kakkhaḷatta*), and resistance (*pattharana*).
2. *Āpo*, represents viscosity (*sinehe*), liquidity (*davatā*), and cohesion (*Baudhanatta*).
3. *Tejo* represents temperature (*tāpa*).
4. *Vāyo* is neither air nor airy. Abhidhamma refers it to distention [*chambhitatha*] or motion [*samudirana*], the cause of motion.

Later, in Abhidhamma, the definition of *vāyo* is denied. *vāyo*, movement means that something moves from one place to another location. Whenever an appearance takes place, there follow disappearance. Things are instantaneous; there is no time to move, to persist. Therefore, motion came to be defined as: the arising of dhammas creates impression of movement. If there is no movement at ultimate sense, you cannot say *vāyo* representing movement. So *vāyo dhātu* came to be defined as the cause of movement.

According to Abhidharma, there is neither single time nor any single space. There are spaces, times. We cannot speak of time without event; speak of space without matter. Time and space are *paññatti*.

The four *mahābhūtas* represent the four material qualities, not substance. They are present everywhere. They arise together and are mutually dependent. One cannot separate one from the others as they necessarily coexist. These four primary elements are not located in different places. Wherever there are *paṭhavi dhātu*, there are *āpo dhātu*. We cannot separate them, but we can distinguish with them.

In different material objects, although the four primary elements are present, one element is more intense than the others. For example, in water, *āpo dhātu* is more intense. In air, *vāyo dhātu* is more intense. Any difference between the material elements is one of intensity.

## The definition of rūpa in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma

In Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma, the totality of rūpa-dharma-s comprises of (i) the Primary matter comprising the four Great Elements (mahābhūta; ‘Great Reals’) - Earth (*paṭhavi*), Water (*ap*), Fire (*tejas*), Air (*vāyu*); (ii) 11 derived matter (*upādāya-rūpa /bhautika*) - five sense faculties (*indriya*), five corresponding objects (*artha/viṣaya*) and non-information matter (*avijñapti-rūpa*).

The four Great Elements are also subsumed under the objects of touch together with other derived tangibles, because their functions can only be experienced through touch. They have the specific nature (*svabhāva*) of solidity (*khara*), humidity (*sneha*), heat (*uṣṇatā*) and mobility (*īraṇā*), respectively, and perform the functions of supporting (*dhṛti*), cohesion (*saṃgraha*), maturation (*pakti*) and extension (*vyūha*), respectively. Sarvāstivāda acknowledges a total of eleven derived tangibles. The other seven are: smoothness (*ślakṣṇatva*), coarseness (*karkaśatva*), heaviness (*gurutva*), lightness (*laghutva*), coldness (*śīta*), hunger (*jighatsā*) and thirst (*pipāsā*). However, among the ‘four great ācārya-s’ of the Sarvāstivāda lineage, Buddhadeva holds that rūpa comprises the mahābhūta-s alone; the so-called derived rūpa-s are just specific types of mahābhūta-s (*mahābhūta-viśeṣa*). His conclusion is said to have been based on certain sūtra statements which speak, for instance, of the solidity within the fleshy eye as the internal Earth Element, the mobility within it as the internal Wind Element and so forth.

Dharmatrāta, while accepting the derived rūpa-s as real entities distinct from the Great Elements, denies the existence of the category of derived matter known as “matter subsumed under the dharmāyatana” — which amounts to the denial of the non-information matter. He further holds that the Great Elements alone are the tangibles; there are no derived tangibles. Saṃghabhadra informs us that the Sthavira Śrīlāta also denies the existence of the derived tangibles. For him they are nothing more than the specific configuration of the Great Elements. Thus, he argues, the so-called coldness is simply a designation for the state wherein the Heat Element becomes less or not predominant. Likewise, heaviness or lightness is simply a designation of the fact that there exists a bigger or smaller quantity of the Great Elements within a given form of matter. He offers another reason for his denial: these so-called derived tangibles are also cognizable by our eyes. That is to say: our eyes grasp, accordingly as the case may be, the shape, quantity, color or appearance of the Great Elements. They can also cognize things which are smooth or coarse.

## Explanation of the term *mahābhūta*

The Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra remarks that the compound mahābhūta is to be taken as a descriptive compound (*karmadhāraya samāsa*), as in the case of mahābhūmi, and mahā-rājan, etc.: they are both mahā and bhūta, hence named mahābhūta. The Avatāra explains: They are called the Great Elements because of their being both great and having the nature of an Element (*bhūta*). Thus Space [although great], is not included among the Great Elements, as by ‘Element’ one means the ability to produce its own fruit (*svaphala*). They are said to be ‘great’ as they are found in all secondary matter. Thus, there are only four Great Elements because (i) there is no use for [any] more, and (ii) there will be inaptitude [with regard to the fulfillment of the four functions if any one of them is lacking]; as in the case of a couch [which has four and only four] legs. The sentence italicized above, potentially very informative in terms of doctrine, is, however, not found in the Tibetan version of Avatāra.

In the Vaibhāṣika doctrine, all conditioned dharma-s have this capability, and it is by virtue of this capability, technically called *kāritra*, that a conditioned dharma is distinguishable as being present, as opposed to being past or future. According to this explanation, Space is not a *bhūta* on account of its non-productivity. This is because, for the Sarvāstivāda, Space is an unconditioned which transcends causality in space-time. That 'Space' (虛空) in the above passage refers to the unconditioned *ākāśa* is clear from the fact that the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharmikas sharply distinguish this from *ākāśa-dhātu* (空界) which is *rūpa* in nature.

In this same context, Vasumitra's explanation is that *ākāśa* is not one of the *mahābhūta*-s because it is devoid of their characteristics: increase, decrease; harm, benefit; gaining strength, waning — all characteristics of the conditioned.

The Bhadanta's explanation may be compared to that given by the compilers of the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra themselves:

Bhadanta: Space, although being great, is not *bhūta* in its nature as it is nonproductive. The other *saṃskṛta* dharma-s [— other than the *mahābhūta* -s —] although capable of being considered as *bhūta*, are not great in their nature as their characteristics are not common [to all material dharma-s]. Thus, Space is not classified as *mahābhūta*.

Question: Why are other dharma-s not called *mahābhūta* -s?

Answer: Because the others do not have such characteristics as the *mahābhūta* -s. That is: because the unconditioned dharma-s are great but not *bhūta*; the other conditioned dharma-s are *bhūta* but are not great. Accordingly, these four alone receive the name *mahābhūta*-s.

It can be seen that in Bhadanta's explanation, Space is clearly contrasted with the conditioned dharma-s; and the comparison with the compilers' own explanation bears out that Space, in all these explanations, refers to the unconditioned *ākāśa*. Accordingly, it can be concluded that *bhūtam*, in the compound *mahābhūta*, refers to the reals - the causally productive - in the domain of the conditioned. Among these, only those four reals are the 'Great Reals' because they alone form the indispensable basis for the arising of all the derived *rūpa*-s.

Or rather, as the compilers here explain: *Bhūta* signifies that which can decrease or increase, harm or benefit, which arises and ceases. *Mahā* signifies that whose substance, characteristics, shape and quantity pervade everywhere, accomplishing great action.

Question: How do these four accomplish great work?

Answer: The great work consists in their being the supporting bases for the great masses of derived matter, causing them to disintegrate or to be formed.

### **Great Elements as *dhātu*-s**

The Great Elements are also called *dhātu* -s in the sense of the ultimate source of genesis. For what reasons are these Great Elements named *dhātu*?

Answer: Because they are the place of origin of all rūpa-dharma-s. It is also from the Great Elements [themselves] that the Great Elements are produced. In the world, the places of origin are called dhātu -s; as for instance, the mines of gold, etc., are said to be the dhātu-s of gold, etc. Or, because they are the place of origin of various types of unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), they are said to be dhātu; example as before. According to some: they are named dhātu because they sustain the self characteristics of the Great Elements and secondary matter.

### **Inseparability of the Great Elements**

The four Great Elements exist inseparably from one another, being co-existent causes (sahabhū-hetu) one to another. Nevertheless, rūpa dharma-s are manifested and experienced in diverse forms because of the difference in intensity or substance of one or more of the four Elements. It is therefore clear that inseparability does not necessarily mean that the four Great Elements are juxtaposed. It means that the four always co-exist and are functionally interdependent. They are what the Sarvāstivādin call co-existent causes to one another. Their inseparability can be inferred from their specific characteristic and activity that can be observed in all material aggregates. Thus, in an aggregate of fluid, besides the obvious specific characteristic of the Water Element, there must also be the Earth Element without which ice cannot result when the weather is extremely cold, nor can a ship be supported; there must be the Fire Element without which the fluid would never become warm; there must be the Wind Element without which it would never move. Thus, the Sarvāstivāda maintains that despite their divergent characteristics, the four Great Elements always arise together.